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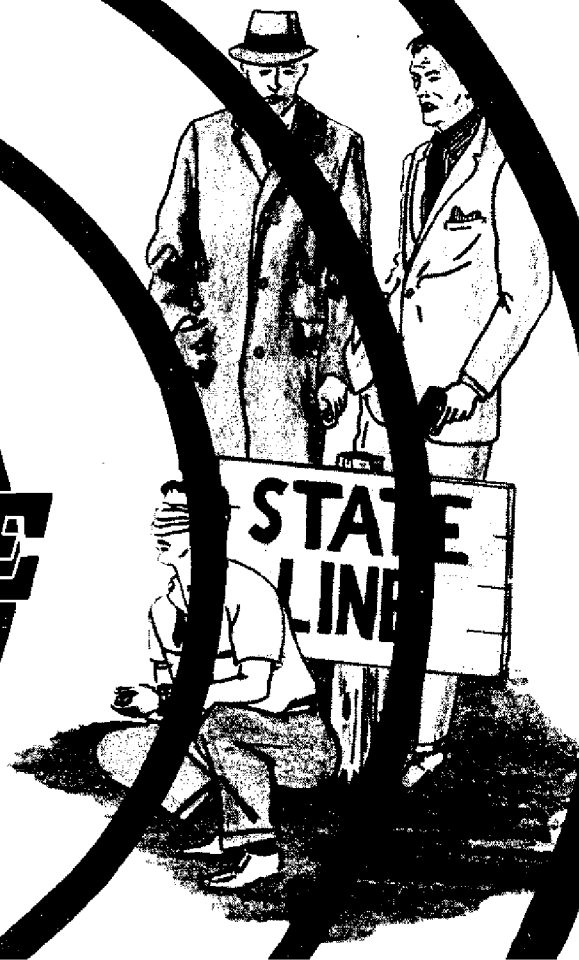
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KILLING ZONE

BY JACK RITCHIE



Big Joe pulled the car to the side of the back country road. "Should we shoot Harry in Illinois or Wisconsin?"

Reilly tossed away his cigarette. "What's the difference?"

I didn't think there was any important difference either, but nobody was asking me.

"Well," Big Joe said, "In Illinois they got the electric chair. In Wisconsin there's no death penalty."

Reilly looked at him. "You're figuring on getting caught?"

"No," Big Joe said, "But still you got to look ahead."

Reilly shrugged. "Where are we now?"

"In Illinois," Big Joe said. He pointed down the lonely moonlit road. "That sign up ahead is the boundary. When you go past it, you're in Wisconsin."

Reilly got out of the car and came around to the back door. He untied my feet, but not my hands. "All right, Harry, get out."

I pushed myself to my feet and leaned against the side of the car.

Big Joe came around from the driver's side. "Personally the electric chair gives me the willies. Psychological, I guess."

Reilly looked over the countryside speculatively. "I'd take the chair any day. I get nightmares when I think about sitting in a cell the rest of my life." He indicated a clump of trees. "Get moving, Harry."

"Just a minute," I said. "My legs are asleep. I got to get the circulation going."

"Well, hurry it up," Reilly said. "It's chilly out here."

"As long as we're in Illinois, Reilly," Big Joe said, "I'd just as soon have you shoot Harry."

"Okay," Reilly said. "So I'll shoot him."

I talked to Big Joe. "Of course you realize that you'd still be as guilty of murder as Reilly? You're an accomplice and you'll get what he gets. A trip

through that little green door."

"It's painted gray now," Big Joe said. But he thought about it. "I don't want to be no accomplice to that electric chair, Reilly. We'll take Harry over to Wisconsin and I'll shoot him there."

Reilly had been thinking too. "Now hold it. So if you kill him in Wisconsin, that makes me the accomplice, don't it? I'm not going to spend the rest of my life in a ten by six bird cage." He took out his .45 automatic. "I'll finish Harry off right here."

Big Joe grabbed his arm. "I can't let you do that, Reilly. I once touched a bare wire and I know what the juice feels like."

"Well hell," Reilly snapped. "I spent seven years behind the walls and I'd rather sit in the chair."

"Gentlemen," I said. "Let me get this straight. You, Big Joe, won't let Reilly shoot me in Illinois because you're afraid of the chair?"

That's right," Big Joe said.

(Cont. on Page 73)

KILLING ZONE

(Cont. from Page 28)

"And you, Reilly, won't let Big Joe shoot me in Wisconsin because you can't stand small rooms?"

"You got the picture."

"Thanks," I said.

I began running.

It didn't take me long to discover that trying to make time with your hands tied behind your back isn't the best way to do it.

Big Joe tackled me after about fifty yards.

Reilly joined him and they both sat on me.

Big Joe scratched his head. "What do we do now?"

I gave the situation some thought too. "Why don't you ask the boss?"

"He isn't here," Big Joe said.

I spit out some grass. "So drive to the nearest town and use the phone."

They considered that, and Big Joe nodded. "He's right. You stay with Harry. I'll be back in a little while."

"As long as you're going to town," I said, "I'd like to write a letter to my mother and maybe you could mail it."

"You're kidding," Reilly said.

I shook my head. "No. I haven't seen her in six years. It's my last request."

They looked at each other for a while and then Big Joe said, "We've

known Harry for years, Reilly. We ought to honor his last request."

He went to the car and came back with a flashlight and dirty square of paper. "That's all I could find in the glove compartment, Harry."

They re-tied my feet, but took the rope off my hands.

I rubbed my wrists for a couple of minutes and when I could hold a pencil I used a flat rock for a table and began to write.

When I finished, I handed the sheet of paper to Reilly. He read it and passed it on to Big Joe.

Big Joe nodded. "You write a nice letter, Harry. Anybody can tell you really love her. When I get to town I'll rustle up an envelope and a stamp. What's the address?"

"Letitia Nelson," I said. "1732 W. Emory, Las Vegas, Nevada. 53210."

Reilly had me put the address on top of the sheet of paper and then handed it back to Big Joe. "When you make out the envelope, copy his handwriting. And see that you don't leave our fingerprints on anything."

Big Joe nodded and left in the car.

He came back forty-five minutes later.

"What did the boss say?" Reilly asked.

"He said a lot of things," Big Joe said. "But finally it come out that we should toss a coin."

Reilly was unhappy. "I don't like it. We're back where we started. I'm not going to have Harry killed in Wisconsin no matter what the coin says."

"The same goes for Illinois," Big Joe said.

"Did you mail the letter?" I asked.

"Yeah," Big Joe said.

They listened to the crickets for a while and then Reilly rubbed his jaw. "On the other hand, when the boss says to do something, he means it. Otherwise we don't have no more birthdays."

Big Joe sighed. "All right, Reilly. Heads, Wisconsin. Tails, Illinois."

I cleared my throat. "Big Joe, that wasn't no Zip Code number in the address I gave you. That was the license plate of your car."

Reilly looked at him. "Is that right, Joe?"

Big Joe shrugged. "I don't know. Who remembers his license plate number? Right now I don't even remember what figures I put on the envelope."

I didn't remember what they were either, but at a time like this one number was as good as another. "And so naturally," I said, "this being my last letter from this world, when my mother hears that I'm dead she'll take it to the police. And it won't take them too long to figure that maybe the number in the address isn't just the wrong Zip Code."

Big Joe and Reilly looked at each other. "What do we do now?" Big Joe asked.

"There's only one thing to do if you don't want to go to the chair or get crazy in a cell," I said. "Let me go. I'll put a couple of thousand miles between us and you can go back to the boss and tell him that you put me away. Who'll know the difference?"

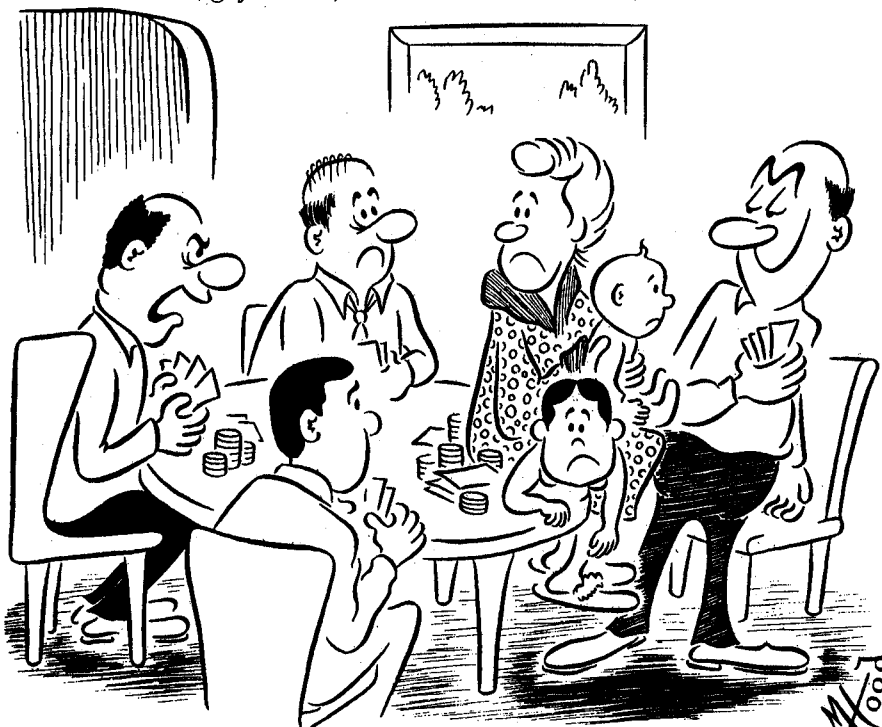
The wheels went around in their heads for about five minutes and then finally they both nodded.

By the time we reached the main highway, the circulation was back in my legs and I felt fine.

Big Joe waited at the arterial stop for a space in the passing traffic. "I just thought of something, Reilly," he said. "Why don't we take Harry to Nevada? They got the gas chamber out there and that don't worry me none at all."

I was out of the car in half a second.

And this time nobody, but *nobody*, could keep up with me. *SM*



"I still think you're bluffing, Waldroopi!"